

Student-Athlete Concussions

Key Issues Identified by Round Table Members

How are we doing?

- It is essential to address practical application of the guidelines and legislation.
- Since 2006, how have schools (with *and* without athletic training services) adopted the current legislation?¹
- As currently written, the statute is not consistent with the Department of Education's recommendations for return to learn, academic adjustments, and an emphasis on student-athletes not returning to play prior to returning to full participation in the classroom. Will this be amended?
- Implementation is a process and should address lessons we have learned.
- The guidelines should be required for ALL recreational sports (not just those utilizing public school property).
- What are additional obstacles impairing the ability of schools to design and implement evidence-based concussion management protocols?
- What is the long-term effect of concussions in student-athletes in Virginia? This would be a longitudinal study.

Limited Resources

- There is a need to balance the desire to keep students safe and our capacity to manage, monitor, train, and report.
- The state budget does not provide funding for athletes.
- School divisions are strapped for resources and personnel.
- There is opposition to additional state mandates without the resources to implement.
- There are challenges and lessons learned with concussion education and models by school systems because of varying resources and populations.
- What additional resources do school's need to help develop/implement effective concussion management policies?

Best Practices

- What are the most effective modes of student, parent/guardian, and administrator education in terms of the signs and symptoms of sport concussions to ensure removal from play and referral to an appropriate health care provider? How can current educational materials be improved?
- Return to learn must continue to be at the forefront of any plan.
- There must be equal focus on prevention and treatment.
- There needs to be discussion about the feasibility of implementing "no hit" practices to reduce exposures.

¹ VA Code § 22.1-275.1.

Public Awareness and Training

- There is still not enough required education in the medical community regarding this subject (i.e. CAT scans are still being ordered for suspected concussion victims with a “no concussion” decision when the CAT scan is “clean”).
- There are challenges with access to health care and perceptions of concussions among different cultures and socio-economic situations.
- There is a need to recognize the different triggers for symptoms – environmental versus cognitive versus physical exertion.
- There are communication challenges among stakeholders about lessons learned.
- Assuring appropriate education for students, parents, and coaches regarding all of return to learn and students’ progress
- It is important to understand the individuality of the diagnosis and that everyone will recover at different rates and have different impairments.
- There needs to be better education of the coaches, parents, and athletes as well as monitoring to ensure that ALL have received this education.
- There should be a standard minimum education that is expected of coaches, parents, and athletes.

Return to Learn

- Balancing the need for brief cognitive rest and flexibility in adapting to the school setting for those students with intractable symptoms along with the need to re-integrate the student-athlete into their academic studies
- Establishing a seamless communication system within schools so that both the athletic training/nursing staff and educators are informed of student symptoms to assist with return to learn.
- A review mechanism for those students with very prolonged symptoms so that further evaluation occurs by a health care provider with expertise in sports concussions.
- There are challenges with implementation of return to learn protocols.
- What communication mechanisms/tools are schools using to ensure that counselors, teachers, etc. are up-to-date on the student’s progress through the return to learn and/or return to play progressions?
- Which individual/individuals are charged with making decisions regarding how and when a student advances from one phase to the next in the return to learn progression?
- Correlating strategies/plans for return to learn (progressive integration back to full class load) with return to play – such strategies would consider role of temporary academic accommodations.
- Possible use of assessments to better individualize/tailor such accommodations
- There is a need to plan for additional care if progression of recovery is delayed.
- Return to play guidelines are better defined but how are schools monitored to determine if they are using such guidelines?
- There is a need to develop a system that provides for active communication between parents, teachers, certified athletic trainers (ATC), and nurses to assure

that the child is doing well within the school and that all team members are up-to-date on that child's progress.

- Students absent from school (or those who have a substantially reduced workload) become very concerned and often clinically anxious about missed work; this concern can adversely affect recovery. School systems also become concerned about a student's limited access to learning curriculum. Plans should establish - as best as possible - what are the resources available within the school system to provide the necessary remediation for "missed learning," while similarly developing procedures for the accommodations and flexibility that may be available and appropriate to address a student's concern for "missed work".
- It is important to have student athletes back in school when they are ready, but with the appropriate supports so that they can be successful.

Athletic Trainers and Physical Therapists

- What are the basic elements of a multidimensional assessment of sports' concussions that can be employed at schools with and without a full-time certified athletic trainer?
- How can the Commonwealth of Virginia assist those schools without athletic training services care for its student-athletes?
- The role of the physical therapist (PT) as an important part of the healthcare team is not well recognized in Virginia's current concussion policies, and policies should be updated to recognize the important role of PTs. The American Physical Therapy Association issued a position on concussions, which states concussions should be evaluated and managed by a multidisciplinary team of licensed health care professionals, of which physical therapists are an integral part. Current proposed federal legislation (SAFE PLAY Act, S. 436/H.R. 829) also supports the PT as a part of the healthcare provider team in management of concussions.
- There has been some concern expressed from physical therapists working in the school setting that the impact of concussions on children who are not student-athletes are underemphasized and perhaps overlooked.

Community

- School divisions seem to have been identified as the arena where all/most concussions occur. The very nature of the injury creates an unknown as to the when, how, and severity, yet school divisions are the source legislatively tasked with the identification and handling of suspected concussions. Where are other community groups in the recognition, establishment, reporting, and implementation of plans?

School Community

- To what degree do school divisions' policies include school counselors, school psychologists, school nurses, and other school-based professionals in the divisions' overall management efforts? If these individuals are included, what is their role?
- Also recommended to define the roles and responsibilities of individuals within the school to bridge the school – family, school – medical and even school-

athletic relationships. Similarly, defining expectations (e.g., roles and responsibilities) within the community will better prepare the school for receiving recommendations coming in from these critical community partners.

Tracking Progress

- What mechanisms are schools using to 1) accurately count the number of students diagnosed with a concussion and 2) track the student's overall progress through the various stages of the return to learn and return to play progressions?
- Does any agency within Virginia have an accurate count of the annual number of students in Virginia diagnosed with a concussion?
- Are local schools required to report incidence numbers to the Department of Education? There needs to be better understanding of any reporting mechanisms between local schools and the Department of Education.
- What entity is monitoring whether schools have developed a concussion management plan and if they have implemented the plan as required? Some schools either do not have a plan or have a plan that is just a copy of the Board of Education's guidelines.
- Have any coaches been disciplined for not following the law? There have been numerous times I have seen patients whose coaches did not pull them out despite having a concussion.
- Over the past 3 years, have we seen a decrease in concussions and/or a decrease or increase in reporting?
- How many student-athletes have stopped playing school sports over the past 3 years due to concussions?

School Division Student-Athlete Concussion Policies

- Where will the "best practice" evidence (or more likely expert recommendations) come from for building these management plans (i.e. what guidance documents will be used)?
- Are resource supports available to assist in writing these plans (either through other school districts or through local/regional experts)?
- Is there a need for any further review or vetting of school divisions' plans once written? If so, by whom and how?
- It is recommended that plans should contain a specific schedule and procedure for the training and preparing staff within different areas of the school (e.g., health, academics, athletics, etc.) to implement plans.

Football

- Update from the football task force along with information on contact practices
- How are these policies being implemented and followed; are there any issues or concerns from coaches, players, or families?
- Can/should these regulations be adopted for other sports?

Out of School Concussions

- Challenges with out-of-school sponsored activities that result in concussions.

Example Finding:

Currently the Board of Education shall include in its guidelines a “Return to Learn Protocol.” However, local school divisions are not mandated to include a “Return to Learn Protocol” in their own policies – as written in the *Code of Virginia*.

According to the Commission on Youth Survey on Policies on Concussions in Student-Athletes, 33 percent of local school divisions do not have a “Return to Learn Protocol” in their policies.

The Code of Virginia only requires the Board of Education to include in the guidelines the two following areas:

- School personnel shall be alert to cognitive and academic issues that may be experienced by a student-athlete who has suffered a concussion or other head injury; and
- School personnel shall accommodate the gradual return to full participation in academic activities by a student-athlete who has suffered a concussion or other head injury as appropriate.

However, the Code does not require the local divisions to adopt these policies and procedures.

Example Recommendation:

Recommend that § 22.1-271.5 (B) of the *Code of Virginia* be updated to require local school divisions to develop policies and procedures regarding "Return to Learn Protocol." These policies and procedures shall address the areas outlined in § 22.1-271.6.